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NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS IMPACT OF FEDERAL PROGRAMS ON WETLANDS

Additional measures to reduce degradation and conversion of America's wetlands are being recommended to Congress by Secretary of the Interior Don Hodel.

In a new report entitled "The Impact of Federal Programs on Wetlands," Hodel said, "Wetlands are disappearing and being degraded rapidly. Although there are a number of federal programs designed to protect wetlands, other federal programs and policies tend to encourage conversion and development of wetlands."

The report noted that laws supported and signed by this Administration, such as the Coastal Barrier Resources Act of 1982, the Food Security Act of 1985, the Tax Reform Act of 1986, and the Water Resources Development Act of 1986, make it less advantageous to drain wetlands, and the laws "have the potential for solving many of the economic and environmental problems which were identified during the study."

The study's recommendations are intended to "build on the foundation established by these landmark statutes" and protect environmentally-sensitive areas by means such as reducing or eliminating subsidies.

The report, which was requested by Congress in the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986, covers the inland forested wetlands of the Lower Mississippi alluvial plain in Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri, and the Prairie Pothole region of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa. Another study on all other major wetland areas in the United States is under way.

The report said further analysis of the effectiveness of the Swampbuster provisions of the Food Security Act of 1985 is necessary in order to better assess the protection offered by the current conservation provisions.

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Emphasizing that action at many levels must be taken to save these vital areas, the report warns: "A combination of changes in land ownership and the cyclical nature of agricultural prices makes it highly likely that most unprotected wetlands will eventually be vulnerable to conversion."

"This report's findings support the actions we are already taking to save and restore wetlands through the North American Waterfowl Management Plan," said Frank Dunkle, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan is a 15-year program by the United States and Canada to preserve and restore key habitats for waterfowl and other wildlife. Two of the focus areas of the plan are the prairie potholes and the Mississippi Delta wetlands.

The Mississippi Delta, which originally included nearly 24 million acres of bottomland forests, now has been reduced to less than 5.2 million acres. About 7 million acres remain of the original 20 million acres of prairie wetlands in the United States.

Federal policy with regard to wetlands is neither comprehensive nor consistent, according to the report. Some federal policies encourage conversion of wetlands to other uses by increasing the profits or reducing the risk of such efforts, while simultaneously other federal programs restrict development or encourage conservation of wetlands.

The study examines the effects of agricultural programs; water management programs such as flood control, drainage, and irrigation; highway programs; conservation programs; and provisions of the tax code.

In both the Prairies and the Delta, the report says, agriculture accounts for almost all development in wetlands. In the Delta, federal flood control and drainage projects built between 1935 and 1984 accounted for about 25 percent of wetlands loss. The report found that, historically, the clearing of forested wetlands for agriculture has been highly profitable, but that basic economic conditions are no longer as favorable to bottomland development as in the past. Nevertheless, Delta wetlands remain vulnerable to agricultural development whenever economic conditions yield high returns to agriculture.

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In the Prairies, federal agricultural programs, particularly price and income supports, significantly increased the profitability of draining wetlands, according to the report. However, drainage of prairie potholes has generally been profitable even in the absence of government incentives. Outlet ditches provided for construction of roads and highways have significantly facilitated drainage of prairie potholes, even though federal regulations prohibit the installation of privately owned lines or conduits on federal highway projects for the purpose of draining adjacent wetlands. Major impacts to prairie wetlands have also come from construction of five large dams and reservoirs along the mainstem of the Missouri River during the 1950's and 1960's, resulting in the loss of nearly all riparian wetlands and oxbow lakes in North and South Dakota.

The report's recommendations include requiring that sponsors of new federal water projects affecting wetlands pay for the costs of benefits which they receive. In the past, projects were financed almost entirely with general federal revenues rather than by the direct local beneficiaries. Local cost-sharing for some types of projects has increased in recent years, but the study recommends that financing reforms be extended to all federal water projects with an impact on wetlands.

The report also recommends stiffer penalties for use of ditches along federally aided roads or federal highways for unauthorized drainage of wetlands. Also recommended is more effective consultation between the states, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Federal Highway Administration in work prior to highway construction in order to prevent damage to wetlands.

The study further calls upon state and local agencies and private conservation organizations "to participate in cost-sharing for wetland restoration projects with landowners enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program." That program provides annual rental payments to farmers who enroll their highly erodible cropland in the reserve for 10 years.

Copies of the report may be obtained by writing: Wetlands Report, Office of Program Analysis, Room 4412, Department of the Interior, 18th and C Streets, NW., Washington, DC 20240.